MARJORIE LIU
SANA TAKEDA
ISSUE 15
image
MONSTRESS

THE MONSTRESS STORY SO FAR...

On the Isle of Bones, Maika finally learned a key detail about her mysterious past: her mother, Moriko, deliberately conceived Maika with an eye-marked descendant of the Shaman-Empress so that Maika could inherit the Shaman-Empress's power – and the Monstrum that now lives beneath her skin.

That power and heritage proved to be both a blessing and a curse in the aftermath of Maika's trip to the Isle. After Zinn, the Monstrum inside her, slaughtered a ship full of Thyrian sailors, Maika and her companions were offered sanctuary from Thyrian forces in the city of Pontus – but only if Maika agreed to activate the famed Pontus Shield, a task only descendants of the Shaman-Empress can perform. Lacking any other options, Maika agreed, but when she stepped into the shield apparatus, it surged with overwhelming power that seemed to fuel Zinn but left the apparatus itself in shambles.

Elsewhere, representatives of the Arcanic Dusk and Dawn Courts continued their diplomatic negotiations, hoping for an alliance in the face of impending war – but true trust between the two factions remained elusive.

THE PLAYERS...

MAIKA An Arcanic teen who survived the Great War, and slavery at the hands of the Cumaean witch nuns. Ruthless and haunted, she is determined to uncover the truth behind her mother's murder — and her mother's secrets — in the hope that she can free herself from an ancient and dangerous god called a Monstrum that is imprisoned inside her body and fills her with an otherworldly hunger for human flesh. In her current possession are two clues to her past: a photograph, and a fragment of a mask that many would kill to possess.

ZINN A mysterious, primordial Monstrum of tremendous power that shares Maika's body and mind, and fights her for control. Once considered a god, and drawn into this world by the Shaman-Empress, this Monstrum is driven by a deadly hunger, consuming the lives of humans and Arcanics alike, leaving only their desiccated corpses behind. Though it may give the impression that its only wish is to survive, there's far more to this creature, and its desires, than meets the eye…

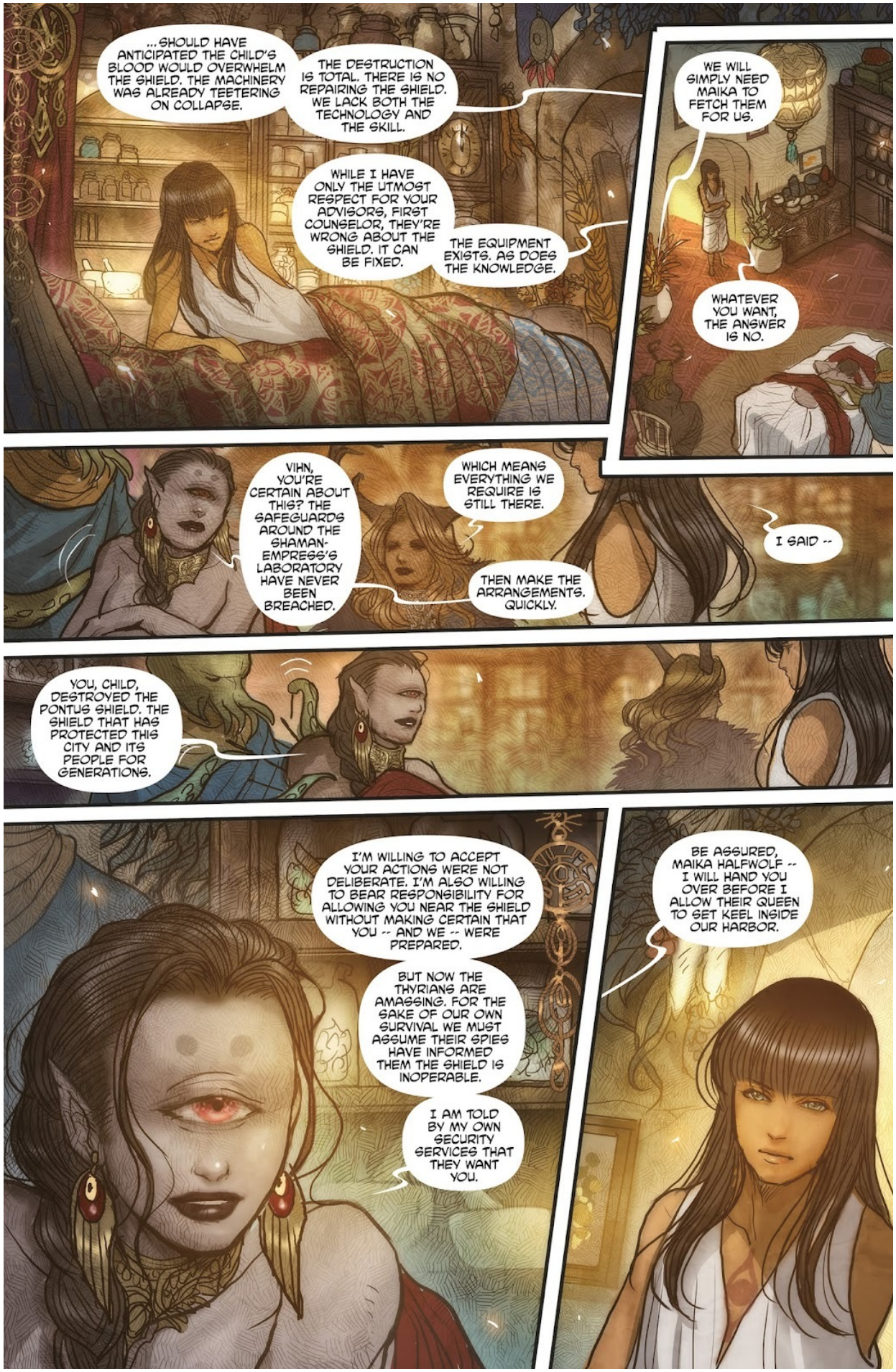
REN An enigmatic nekomancer cat with mysterious motives, he is one of Maika's companions on her journey, and perhaps an agent of the Dusk Court — or some greater power.

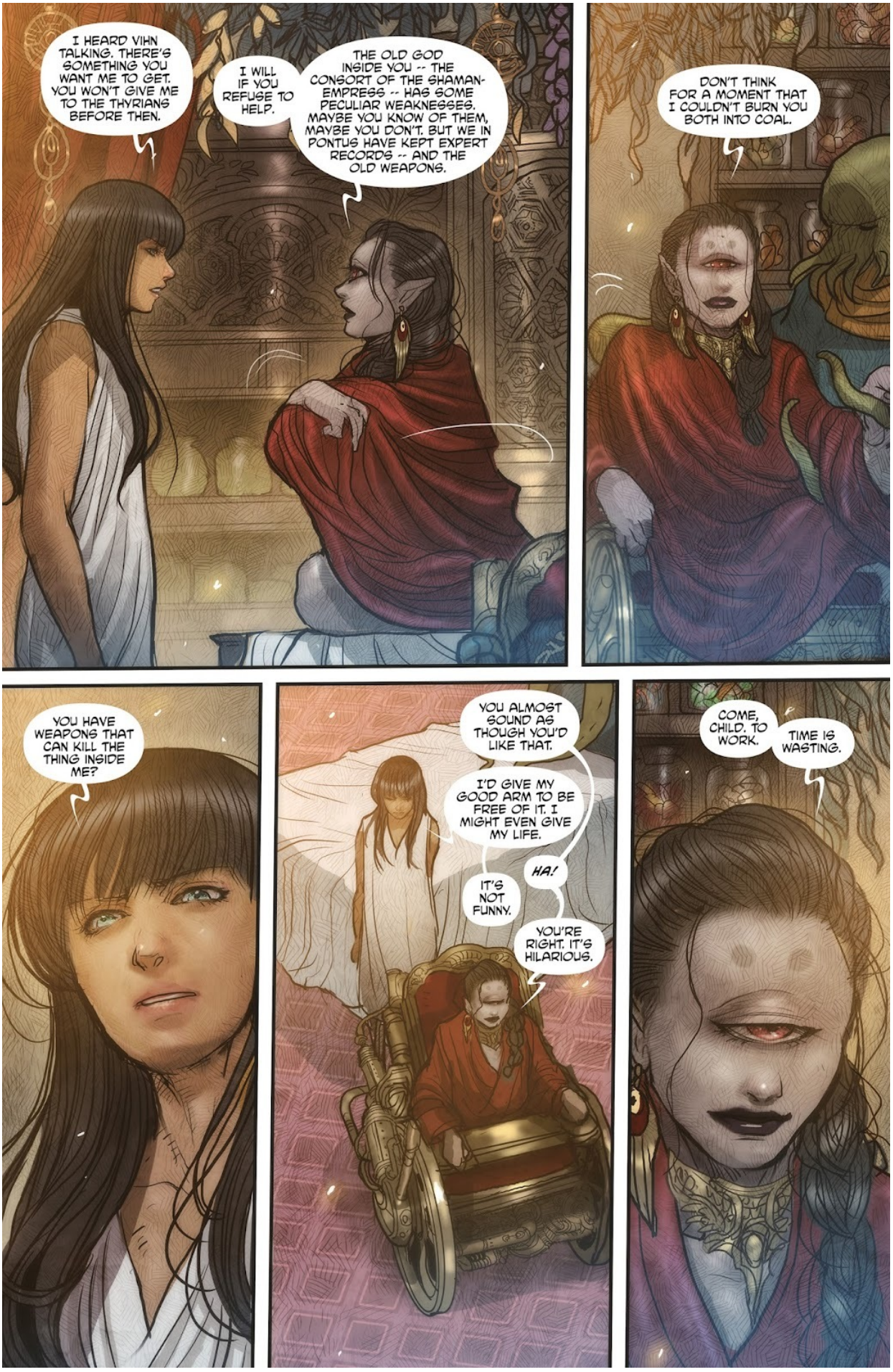
KIPPA An Arcanic fox girl saved from slavery by Maika. Innocent and optimistic, she is frightened by the Monstrum — but trusts Maika and will bravely defend her and others by rushing into battles too dangerous for a child.

TUYA Maika's closest friend in the world, who has been with her since before the Battle of Constantine. Unbeknownst to Maika, she is also the Baroness of the Last Dusk, a high-level member of the Arcanic Dusk Court tasked with containing — or even destroying — Maika's power.

SOMETIMES, I CAN STILL SMELL THEIR BODIES. IN MY HAIR, ON MY SKIN. MY SWEAT STINKS OF THEM.
ASH AND BLOOD, MAIKA. ASH AND BLOOD.
EVEN CONSTANTINE'S NEW IMMIGRANTS COMPLAIN OF THE STENCH. THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS.
THE GOVERNMENT TELLS THEM IT'S JUST ESCAPING GAS.
BUT YOU AND I KNOW THE TRUTH.

TUYA --
I BLAMED MYSELF AT FIRST, YOU KNOW. I SHOULD HAVE KEPT YOU FROM ZAMORA. I SHOULD HAVE BROKEN YOUR DAMNED LEGS.
BUT I ALWAYS KNEW IT WOULDN'T HAVE STOPPED YOU.
YOU'D THINK ACCIDENTALLY MURDERING AN ENTIRE CITY WOULD MAKE SOMEONE CAUTIOUS. YOU'D THINK THE POSSIBLITY OF LOSING YOUR ONLY FRIEND IN THE WORLD WOULD MAKE YOU HESITATE.
BUT THAT'S NOT HOW YOU WERE MADE, IS IT?
YOU WERE CREATED TO BE A WEAPON. AND WEAPONS HAVE NO CAUTION. THEY'RE POINTED IN A DIRECTION AND UNLEASHED.
YOU HAD SO MANY CHANCES TO PROVE TO ME YOU WERE MORE THAN THAT...
...BUT YOU WENT TOO FAR. I CAN'T PROTECT YOU ANYMORE.

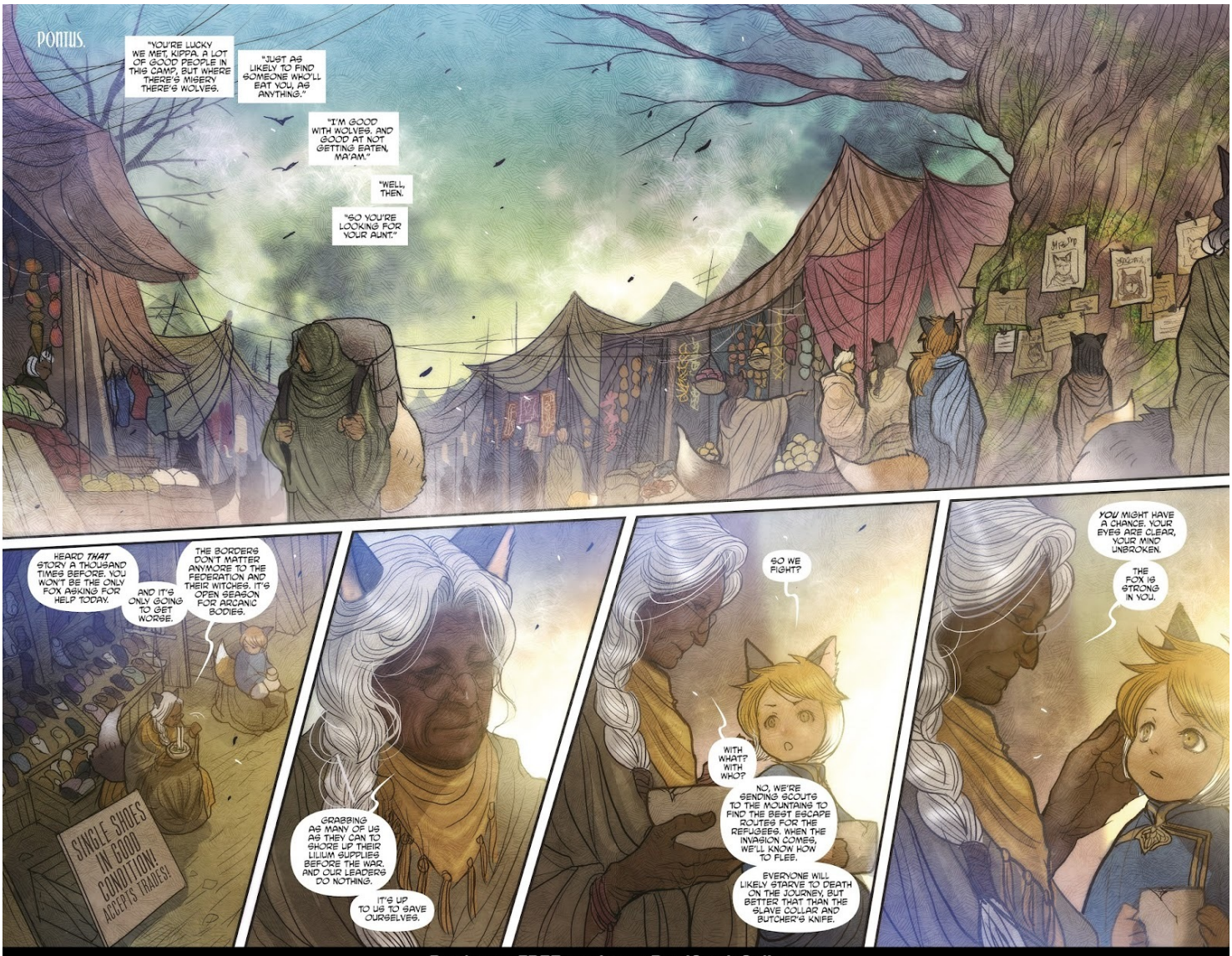

...SHOULD HAVE ANTICIPATED THE CHILD'S BLOOD WOULD OVERWHELM THE SHIELD. THE MACHINERY WAS ALREADY TEETERING ON COLLAPSE.
THE DESTRUCTION IS TOTAL. THERE IS NO REPAIRING THE SHIELD. WE LACK BOTH THE TECHNOLOGY AND THE SKILL.
WHILE I HAVE ONLY THE UTMOST RESPECT FOR YOUR ADVISORS, FIRST COUNSELOR, THEY'RE WRONG ABOUT THE SHIELD. IT CAN BE FIXED.
THE EQUIPMENT EXISTS. AS DOES THE KNOWLEDGE.
WE WILL SIMPLY NEED MAIKA TO FETCH THEM FOR US.
WHATEVER YOU WANT, THE ANSWER IS NO.
VIHN, YOU'RE CERTAIN ABOUT THIS? THE SAFEGUARDS AROUND THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S LABORATORY HAVE NEVER BEEN BREACHED.
WHICH MEANS EVERYTHING WE REQUIRE IS STILL THERE.
THEN MAKE THE ARRANGEMENTS. QUICKLY.
I SAID --
YOU, CHILD, DESTROYED THE PONTUS SHIELD. THE SHIELD THAT HAS PROTECTED THIS CITY AND ITS PEOPLE FOR GENERATIONS.
I'M WILLING TO ACCEPT YOUR ACTIONS WERE NOT DELIBERATE. I'M ALSO WILLING TO BEAR RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALLOWING YOU NEAR THE SHIELD WITHOUT MAKING CERTAIN THAT YOU -- AND WE -- WERE PREPARED.
BUT NOW THE THYRIANS ARE AMASSING. FOR THE SAKE OF OUR OWN SURVIVAL WE MUST ASSUME THEIR SPIES HAVE INFORMED THEM THE SHIELD IS INOPERABLE.
I AM TOLD BY MY OWN SECURITY SERVICES THAT THEY WANT YOU.
BE ASSURED, MAIKA HALFWOLF -- I WILL HAND YOU OVER BEFORE I ALLOW THEIR QUEEN TO SET KEEL INSIDE OUR HARBOR.


I HEARD VIHN TALKING. THERE'S SOMETHING YOU WANT ME TO GET. YOU WON'T GIVE ME TO THE THYRIANS BEFORE THEN.
I WILL IF YOU REFUSE TO HELP.
THE OLD GOD INSIDE YOU -- THE CONSORT OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS -- HAS SOME PECULIAR WEAKNESSES. MAYBE YOU KNOW OF THEM, MAYBE YOU DON'T. BUT WE IN PONTUS HAVE KEPT EXPERT RECORDS -- AND THE OLD WEAPONS.
DON'T THINK FOR A MOMENT THAT I COULDN'T BURN YOU BOTH INTO COAL.
YOU HAVE WEAPONS THAT CAN KILL THE THING INSIDE ME?
YOU ALMOST SOUND AS THOUGH YOU'D LIKE THAT.
I'D GIVE MY GOOD ARM TO BE FREE OF IT. I MIGHT EVEN GIVE MY LIFE.
HA!
IT'S NOT FUNNY.
YOU'RE RIGHT. IT'S HILARIOUS.
COME, CHILD. TO WORK.
TIME IS WASTING.

I AM NOT SOME... PRINCESS... TO BE SOLD OFF TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER.
ABSOLUTELY NOT.
I AM THE WARLORD, THE SWORD OF THE EAST.
THE REASON NONE OF YOU ARE DEAD OR ENSLAVED IS BECAUSE OF ME.
THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE DUSK AND DAWN COURTS REQUIRES MORE THAN A SIGNED PIECE OF PAPER. IT REQUIRES BINDING PROMISES.
AREN'T YOU?
BE STILL, AKU.
WARS ARE ALSO WON THAT WAY, MY DEAR.
AND WHILE IT WOULD MAKE SENSE THAT WE'D PUT ASIDE HISTORIC ENMITIES IN FAVOR OF SURVIVAL, YOU OF ALL PEOPLE KNOW THAT'S NOT HOW IT ALWAYS WORKS.
BUT YOU HAVE THE LATEST WEAPONS TECHNOLOGY, WHILE WE POSSESS A MASSIVE ARMY AND A RICH SUPPLY CHAIN.
TRUST ME. I DON'T WANT TO MARRY YOU, EITHER.

OR DIDN'T YOU BETRAY OVER A THOUSAND DUSK COURT LIVES, INCLUDING THOSE OF DEFENSELESS REFUGEES, DURING THE BATTLE AT FARFANG FJORD?
JUST SO YOUR OWN DAWN COURT TROOPS COULD ESCAPE AN AMBUSH?
YOUR GENERAL --
-- DIED TRYING TO SAVE HER SOLDIERS IN THAT ATTACK.
SO NO. YOUR WORD SIMPLY ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH.
WE NEED BLOOD.
IT'S GOOD YOU ARRIVED WHEN YOU DID, TANNO. THERE'S VENOM IN THE AIR.
HMPH. HAVE WE LEARNED WHY THE OTHER ANCIENTS OF THE DAWN COURT WEREN'T PRESENT FOR THE NEGOTIATION?
THEY'RE NOT IN THE CITY... UP AND VANISHED. OUR INFORMANTS CAN'T TELL US WHEN OR EVEN *IF* THEY LEFT.
WHICH MAKES NO SENSE. WHAT ANCIENT WOULD TRAVEL NOW? AND ALL OF THEM, TOGETHER? THEY'RE TOO CAUTIOUS FOR THAT KIND OF FOOLISHNESS.
THE BARONESS WAS TROUBLED BY THEIR ABSENCE.
AS AM I.

"WHAT ABOUT FISK? HAS SHE LEARNED ANYTHING?"
"SHE FOUND A CAT WILLING TO TALK. SOME APPRENTICE WHO SAYS THE WARLORD COMMITTED A RECENT ATROCITY THAT INVOLVED THE LOCAL NEKOMANCERS."
"*HMPH.* NOTHING FISK FINDS WILL MAKE THE BARONESS CHANGE HER MIND ABOUT CEMENTING THE ALLIANCE.
"NOT IF IT MEANS SHE'LL GAIN CLOSER ACCESS TO THE WOLF QUEEN AND HER DEMON GRANDDAUGHTER."
GODDESS, HAVE MERCY.


PONTUS.
"YOU'RE LUCKY WE MET, KIPPA. A LOT OF GOOD PEOPLE IN THIS CAMP, BUT WHERE THERE'S MISERY THERE'S WOLVES.
"JUST AS LIKELY TO FIND SOMEONE WHO'LL EAT YOU, AS ANYTHING."
"I'M GOOD WITH WOLVES, AND GOOD AT NOT GETTING EATEN, MA'AM."
"WELL, THEN.
"SO YOU'RE LOOKING FOR YOUR AUNT."
HEARD THAT STORY A THOUSAND TIMES BEFORE. YOU WON'T BE THE ONLY FOX ASKING FOR HELP TODAY.
AND IT'S ONLY GOING TO GET WORSE.
THE BORDERS DON'T MATTER ANYMORE TO THE FEDERATION AND THEIR WITCHES. IT'S OPEN SEASON FOR ARCANIC BODIES.
SINGLE SHOES IN GOOD CONDITION! ACCEPTS TRADES!
GRABBING AS MANY OF US AS THEY CAN TO SHORE UP THEIR LILIUM SUPPLIES BEFORE THE WAR, AND OUR LEADERS DO NOTHING.
IT'S UP TO US TO SAVE OURSELVES.
SO WE FIGHT?
WITH WHAT? WITH WHO?
NO, WE'RE SENDING SCOUTS TO THE MOUNTAINS TO FIND THE BEST ESCAPE ROUTES FOR THE REFUGEES. WHEN THE INVASION COMES, WE'LL KNOW HOW TO FLEE.
EVERYONE WILL LIKELY STARVE TO DEATH ON THE JOURNEY, BUT BETTER THAT THAN THE SLAVE COLLAR AND BUTCHER'S KNIFE.
YOU MIGHT HAVE A CHANCE. YOUR EYES ARE CLEAR, YOUR MIND UNBROKEN.
THE FOX IS STRONG IN YOU.

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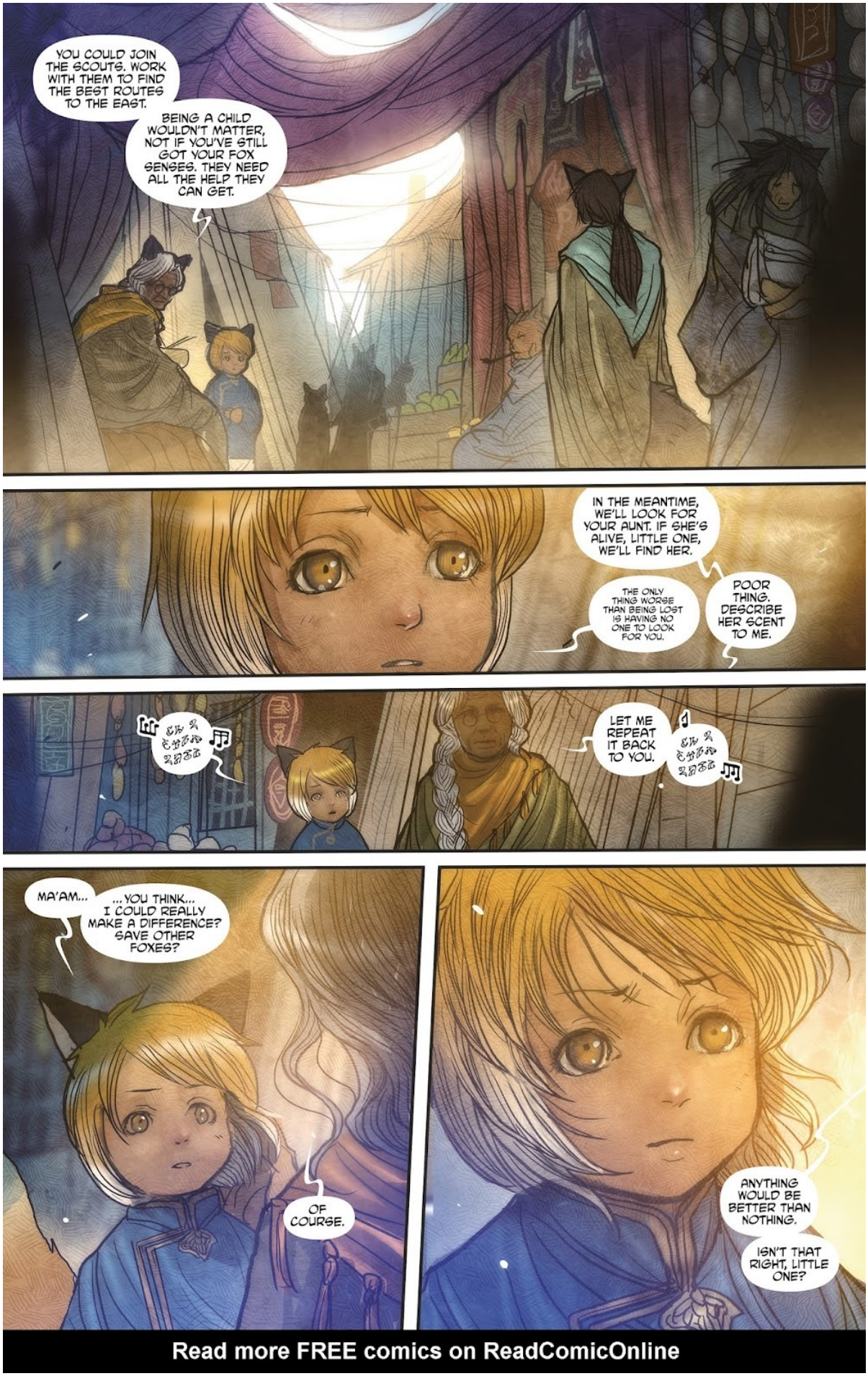
YOU COULD JOIN THE SCOUTS. WORK WITH THEM TO FIND THE BEST ROUTES TO THE EAST.
BEING A CHILD WOULDN'T MATTER, NOT IF YOU'VE STILL GOT YOUR FOX SENSES. THEY NEED ALL THE HELP THEY CAN GET.
IN THE MEANTIME, WE'LL LOOK FOR YOUR AUNT. IF SHE'S ALIVE, LITTLE ONE, WE'LL FIND HER.
THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN BEING LOST IS HAVING NO ONE TO LOOK FOR YOU.
POOR THING. DESCRIBE HER SCENT TO ME.
LET ME REPEAT IT BACK TO YOU.
MA'AM...
...YOU THINK... I COULD REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE? SAVE OTHER FOXES?
OF COURSE.
ANYTHING WOULD BE BETTER THAN NOTHING.
ISN'T THAT RIGHT, LITTLE ONE?

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HALFWOLF.
THERE'S MUSIC IN THIS THING, CAT. I NEVER COULD HEAR IT BEFORE, BUT SOMETHING'S CHANGED. IF I COULD JUST GET CLOSER...
THAT MUSIC IS A LIE. YOU MUST NOT LISTEN.
WHAT DO YOU WANT?
THERE'S... NEWS FROM THYRIA.
I KNOW ABOUT THE FLEET OUTSIDE THE BORDER. THE QUEENS WANT MY HEAD.
ONE OF THE BLOOD QUEENS WAS MURDERED. THE OTHER, CRITICALLY WOUNDED.
ALAS, THIS WILL ONLY MAKE THINGS MORE DIFFICULT FOR YOU.

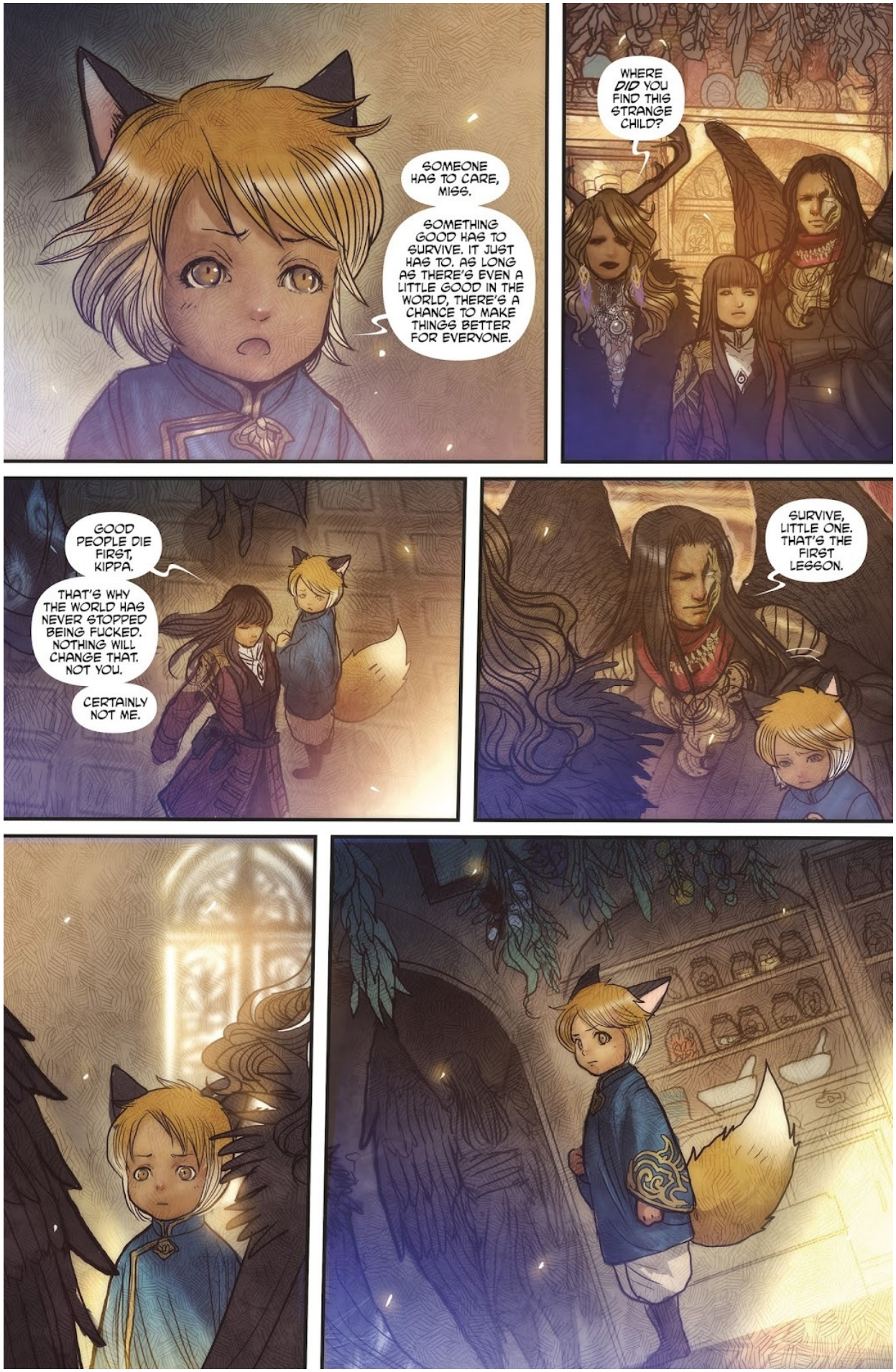
SEIZI.
KENZI.
I'M SORRY.
IF YOU'RE HERE... IT MEANS YOU LOST EVERYTHING. BECAUSE OF ME.
IF WE'RE HERE, IT'S BECAUSE FAMILY PROTECTS FAMILY.
FAMILY ENDURES.
TELL US ABOUT THE BLOOD QUEENS.
INQUISITRIXES INFILTRATED THE CITADEL. MY INFORMANTS REPORT THEY STOLE AN ARTIFACT.
THE PUBLIC DOESN'T KNOW YET, OR ELSE IT WOULD CAUSE A TERROR.
FUCK.
THE OTHER FRAGMENT OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S MASK. THAT HAS TO BE WHAT THE INQUISITRIXES TOOK.

LET THEM HAVE THE CURSED THING.
I'M FAR MORE TROUBLED THAT THE THRYIANS ARE PREPARING TO ATTACK. NOW, MORE THAN EVER, WE REQUIRE SOLIDARITY.
BUT INSTEAD WE'LL WASTE OUR FORCES ON EACH OTHER, WHILE THE FEDERATION PREPARES FOR WAR.
WAIT... YOU WERE ALREADY AWARE THAT THE BLOOD QUEENS HAD A FRAGMENT OF THE --
AH, MAIKA. I'M GLAD I FOUND YOU.
COMMANDERS IMURA. A PLEASURE TO SEE YOU BOTH AGAIN.
THE FIRST COUNSELOR IS WAITING FOR YOU IN HER OFFICE.
A WORD OF CAUTION, MAIKA.
THE LESS YOU SPEAK OF THE MASK, THE BETTER. THE LESS YOU THINK OF IT, THE LESS YOU TOUCH IT... THESE ARE PRECAUTIONS THAT YOU, ABOVE ALL OTHERS, SHOULD TAKE.
I'M SURE ZINN HAS GIVEN YOU SIMILAR UNHEEDED WARNINGS.
WHAT MAKES YOU THINK --
THAT YOU'RE NOT CARRYING A FRAGMENT IN THE POUCH AT YOUR WAIST? IF ONLY THE LIES OF THE YOUNG WERE ALWAYS SO CHARMING.
YOURS IS THE WORST KEPT SECRET IN THE KNOWN WORLD. YOUR CARELESSNESS VERGES ON A DEATH WISH.
IF THE INQUISITRIXES KNEW WHERE TO FIND ONE FRAGMENT, THEN THEY'LL SURELY BE COMING HERE FOR YOURS, MAIKA.
I, FOR ONE, WELCOME THE EXCITEMENT.
BUT *AFTER* THE SHIELD IS FIXED.

MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE, REN. I'M JUST FINISHING UP SOME... MAIL... THAT I'D BEEN PUTTING OFF.

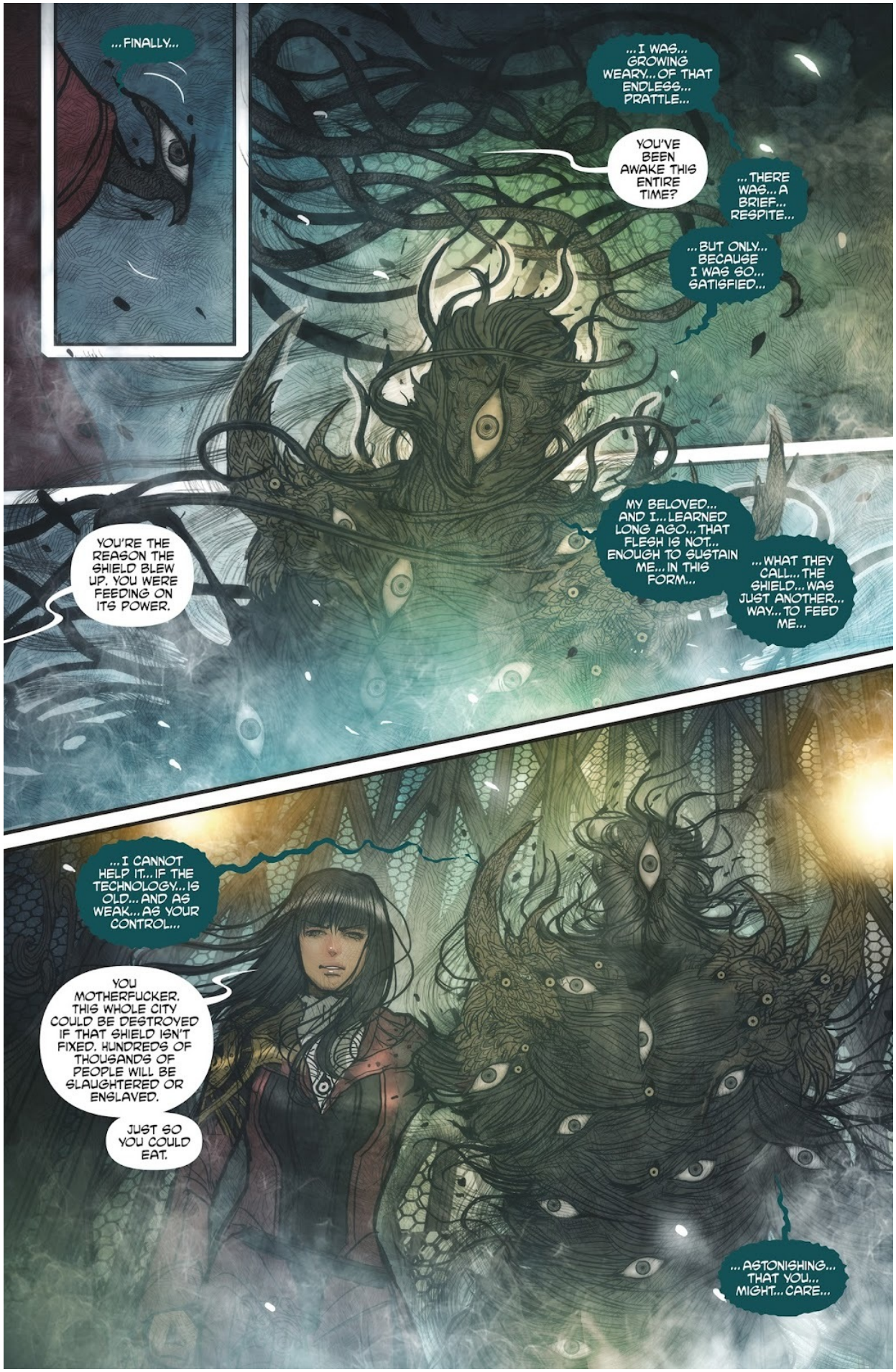
I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME. THE INQUISITRIXES --
-- NOW POSSESS A FRAGMENT OF THE MASK. YES, OF COURSE WE KNOW.
IT WON'T BE A PROBLEM. IN FACT, WE'VE LEARNED A GREAT DEAL IN THE DAYS SINCE THEY STOLE IT.
FINALLY, WE HAVE CONFIRMATION THAT THE CUMAEA HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED BEYOND EVEN THE MOTHER SUPERIOR.
WHAT WILL BE DONE?
NOTHING THAT'S YOUR CONCERN. THIS IS YOUR LUCKY DAY. CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES MEANS YOUR ASSIGNMENT WITH THE HALFWOLF IS ALMOST COMPLETE.
EXCEPT FOR ONE LAST THING.
WE NEED YOU TO BRING US THE CHILD.
BUT, MAIKA --
NO. THE OTHER CHILD.
KIPPA?
WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH HER?
THAT'S THE DOCTOR'S CONCERN, AS ALWAYS.
I KNOW IT HASN'T BEEN EASY, REN.
NEGOTIATING ALL YOUR IDENTITIES, SERVING MULTIPLE MASTERS, HAS BEEN A WRETCHED BURDEN.
BUT YOU'VE ALMOST PAID YOUR DEBT. JUST THIS ONE LAST THING AND YOU'LL BE FREE.
OR YOU CAN RESIST... AND THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES.
SO BRING US THE CHILD, REN.
TONIGHT.

SO... FOR THE LAST *THREE THOUSAND* YEARS THE LEADERS OF PONTUS HAVE KNOWN THE LOCATION OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S SOUTHERN LABORATORY...
... AND THEY DID *NOTHING.*
THERE WAS NOTHING TO *BE* DONE.
THE DOORS CANNOT BE BREACHED WITH BOMBS. THE FLOORS CANNOT BE BROKEN INTO VIA TUNNEL.
NO ONE CAN ENTER THE LABORATORY.
NOT ANCIENTS, NOT HER BLOOD DESCENDANTS -- NOT EVEN THOSE RARE ONES WHO BEAR THE MARK OF THE EYE.
TRUST ME, A FEW HAVE TRIED OVER THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS. SOME KEY ELEMENT WAS ALWAYS MISSING.
BUT YOU THINK I CAN GET IN.
IF NOT YOU, THEN NO ONE.
AND YOU'RE NOT COMING WITH ME. WHY? MAYBE I'LL MISREAD THIS LIST? MAKE A MISTAKE.
THERE MAY BE TRAPS FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE NOT OF THE BLOOD.
AND IF I LOVE ANYTHING, IT'S STAYING ALIVE.
TRAPS, *HUH?* WHAT ELSE?
IF THE SCHOLARS ARE CORRECT, THE MOST IMPORTANT ARCHIVE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE KNOWN WORLD. LOST INVENTIONS OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS, THE TOOLS SHE USED TO CREATE TECHNOLOGIES THAT STILL FUNCTION, THOUSANDS OF YEARS LATER.
SO, WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THERE'S A LOT OF JUNK I'LL NEED TO SORT THROUGH.
MAYBE I SHOULD JUST LET MYSELF BE HANDED OVER TO THE THYRIANS. PONTUS CAN LIVE OR DIE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.
YOU AND YOUR EMPTY THREATS. DO YOU NEVER TIRE OF YOUR BRAVADO?
TRY BEING HONEST FOR ONCE AND SAY YOU'RE FRIGHTENED. IT WOULD BE EASIER.
MISS?
PLEASE DON'T JOKE ABOUT SUCH THINGS. I'VE JUST COME BACK FROM ANOTHER REFUGEE CAMP. EVERYONE *ALREADY* THINKS PONTUS IS GOING TO FALL.
THEY'RE GOOD PEOPLE, BUT NONE OF THEM BELIEVE THEY'RE SAFE HERE BECAUSE THEY DON'T THINK ANYONE CARES.


SOMEONE HAS TO CARE, MISS.
SOMETHING GOOD HAS TO SURVIVE. IT JUST HAS TO. AS LONG AS THERE'S EVEN A LITTLE GOOD IN THE WORLD, THERE'S A CHANCE TO MAKE THINGS BETTER FOR EVERYONE.
WHERE *DID* YOU FIND THIS STRANGE CHILD?
GOOD PEOPLE DIE FIRST, KIPPA.
THAT'S WHY THE WORLD HAS NEVER STOPPED BEING FUCKED. NOTHING WILL CHANGE THAT. NOT YOU.
CERTAINLY NOT ME.
SURVIVE, LITTLE ONE. THAT'S THE FIRST LESSON.

KIPPA!
MASTER REN! I'M SO GLAD TO SEE YOU.
I'VE BEEN LOOKING EVERYWHERE FOR YOU, KIPPA. WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
INTO THE MOUNTAINS TO HELP THE FOX SCOUTS FIND SAFE PASSAGE FOR THE REFUGEES. JUST IN CASE THE WAR COMES HERE.
TELL... TELL MISS THAT I HOPE TO SEE HER AGAIN.
I DOUBT SHE'LL NOTICE I'M GONE, BUT... JUST IN CASE. I DON'T WANT HER TO BE WORRIED.
AND YOU. I'LL PRAY TO THE GODDESS EVERY DAY FOR YOU.
YOU'RE THE BEST FRIEND I'VE HAD SINCE MY FAMILY DIED, MASTER REN.
I LOVE YOU.
KIPPA.
WHY DON'T I COME WITH YOU? JUST FOR A LITTLE BIT. TO MAKE CERTAIN YOU'RE SAFE WITH THESE SCOUTS.

...THE LAB IS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ELEVATOR. WE PULLED THE GUARDS THAT ARE USUALLY STATIONED THERE.
WE DON'T WANT ANYONE KNOWING WHAT YOU'RE ATTEMPTING, ESPECIALLY SHOULD YOU SUCCEED.
RIGHT.
ARE YOU LISTENING?
NO.
CORVIN.
YOU'RE GOING TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME. OR GODDESS HELP YOU, I WILL RIP YOU APART WITH MY BARE HANDS.
SHOULD THERE BE AN ATTACK FROM THE THYRIANS... OR THE FEDERATION...
I'LL KEEP THE FOX CHILD SAFE.
THIS *IS* WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO ASK, WASN'T IT?
FUCK YOU.


...FINALLY...
...I WAS... GROWING WEARY... OF THAT ENDLESS... PRATTLE...
YOU'VE BEEN AWAKE THIS ENTIRE TIME?
...THERE WAS... A BRIEF... RESPITE...
...BUT ONLY... BECAUSE I WAS SO... SATISFIED...
YOU'RE THE REASON THE SHIELD BLEW UP. YOU WERE FEEDING ON ITS POWER.
MY BELOVED... AND I... LEARNED LONG AGO... THAT FLESH IS NOT... ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN ME... IN THIS FORM...
...WHAT THEY CALL... THE SHIELD... WAS JUST ANOTHER... WAY... TO FEED ME...
...I CANNOT HELP IT... IF THE TECHNOLOGY... IS OLD... AND AS WEAK... AS YOUR CONTROL...
YOU MOTHERFUCKER. THIS WHOLE CITY COULD BE DESTROYED IF THAT SHIELD ISN'T FIXED. HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WILL BE SLAUGHTERED OR ENSLAVED.
JUST SO YOU COULD EAT.
...ASTONISHING... THAT YOU... MIGHT... CARE...

OH, SHUT UP.
CAN YOU GET US INTO THE LAB?
...DO NOT... JEST...
I WASN'T. APPARENTLY NO ONE ELSE HAS BROKEN INTO THIS PLACE.
BECAUSE... THEY WERE NOT... A GOD...
...THE DOOR... WAS KEYED... TO ME... BEFORE THE BELOVED'S... PASSING...
...ONLY I... KNOW THE COMBINATION...
...THE BELOVED... FEARED... WHAT OTHERS... WOULD DO... WITH HER GENIUS...

...IT WILL... BE GOOD... TO BE HOME... AGAIN...
YOU CAN'T OPEN IT.
...BE... STILL...
YOU'VE FORGOTTEN THE COMBINATION.
...IT HAS BEEN... THREE THOUSAND YEARS...
THAT'S RIGHT. MAYBE I SHOULD PUT YOU IN A HOME FOR SENILE FUCKING GODS.

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TO BE CONTINUED...

An excerpt of a lecture from the esteemed **Professor Tam Tam,** former First Record-Keeper of the Is'hami Temple, and learned contemporary of Namron Black Claw...

Ah, the Old Gods.

We've discussed them before – their immense power, their destructive natures – how they are the very opposite of divine. Invaders, some Poets claim. Demonic entities from another world, whose unending hunger was an abomination.

Thank Ubasti they were banished. And yet...and yet...how quickly the truth was forgotten.

According to our records, the first cult of the Old Gods emerged almost four thousand years ago, well inland from the coast where humans already worshipped the Wave Empress and her Siren children.

Humans were the logical fools to fall prey to the Old Gods – having never battled them, as the Ancients had – and afflicted by a poverty of spirit unmatched by even the most crude animal. How easily fooled they were by such otherwordly magnificence, whispering empty prayers, making blood sacrifices to demons that would consume them in a heartbeat if they were able.

And yet, in the end, Arcanics fared little better.

The fault rests with one of the Ancients, a changeling trickster who disguised herself to live among mortal humans and Arcanics. She was, perhaps, a little too fond of telling stories, and not wary enough of her own charisma.

Her most famous (and improbable) tale was about an Old God who escapes to the known world in search of redemption, and falls in love with a powerful queen. Against all good sense, this frivolity spread like wildfire – and rewrote history. Suddenly, the Old Gods were creatures of tragedy and romance, longing to walk amongst mortals, and share their wisdom.

And that was enough, kits, to become a religion. Benign, yes, based on a philosophy of love and compassion, and mercy. Looking to the Old Gods as guides to an enlightened life.

But cats have never been fooled. We have never forgotten the horror.

The horror that Ubasti promises will come again.

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NEXT ISSUE

#monstress

MONSTRESS™ ISSUE 15

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ISSUE 15
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MONSTRESS

THE MONSTRESS STORY SO FAR...

On the Isle of Bones, Maika finally learned a key detail about her mysterious past: her mother, Moriko, deliberately conceived Maika with an eye-marked descendant of the Shaman-Empress so that Maika could inherit the Shaman-Empress's power – and the Monstrum that now lives beneath her skin.

That power and heritage proved to be both a blessing and a curse in the aftermath of Maika's trip to the Isle. After Zinn, the Monstrum inside her, slaughtered a ship full of Thyrian sailors, Maika and her companions were offered sanctuary from Thyrian forces in the city of Pontus – but only if Maika agreed to activate the famed Pontus Shield, a task only descendants of the Shaman-Empress can perform. Lacking any other options, Maika agreed, but when she stepped into the shield apparatus, it surged with overwhelming power that seemed to fuel Zinn but left the apparatus itself in shambles.

Elsewhere, representatives of the Arcanic Dusk and Dawn Courts continued their diplomatic negotiations, hoping for an alliance in the face of impending war – but true trust between the two factions remained elusive.

THE PLAYERS...

MAIKA An Arcanic teen who survived the Great War, and slavery at the hands of the Cumaean witch nuns. Ruthless and haunted, she is determined to uncover the truth behind her mother's murder — and her mother's secrets — in the hope that she can free herself from an ancient and dangerous god called a Monstrum that is imprisoned inside her body and fills her with an otherworldly hunger for human flesh. In her current possession are two clues to her past: a photograph, and a fragment of a mask that many would kill to possess.

ZINN A mysterious, primordial Monstrum of tremendous power that shares Maika's body and mind, and fights her for control. Once considered a god, and drawn into this world by the Shaman-Empress, this Monstrum is driven by a deadly hunger, consuming the lives of humans and Arcanics alike, leaving only their desiccated corpses behind. Though it may give the impression that its only wish is to survive, there's far more to this creature, and its desires, than meets the eye…

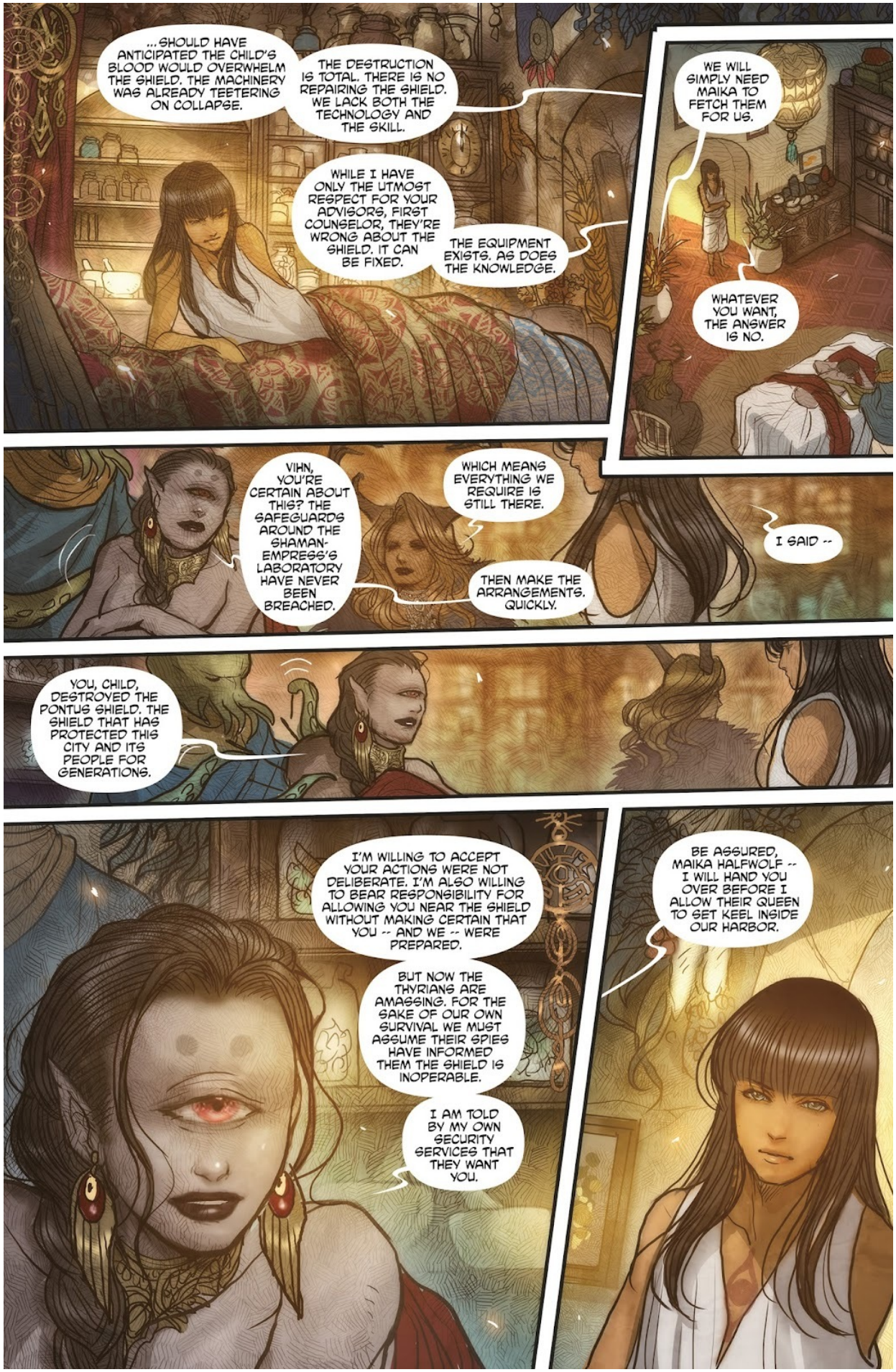
REN An enigmatic nekomancer cat with mysterious motives, he is one of Maika's companions on her journey, and perhaps an agent of the Dusk Court — or some greater power.

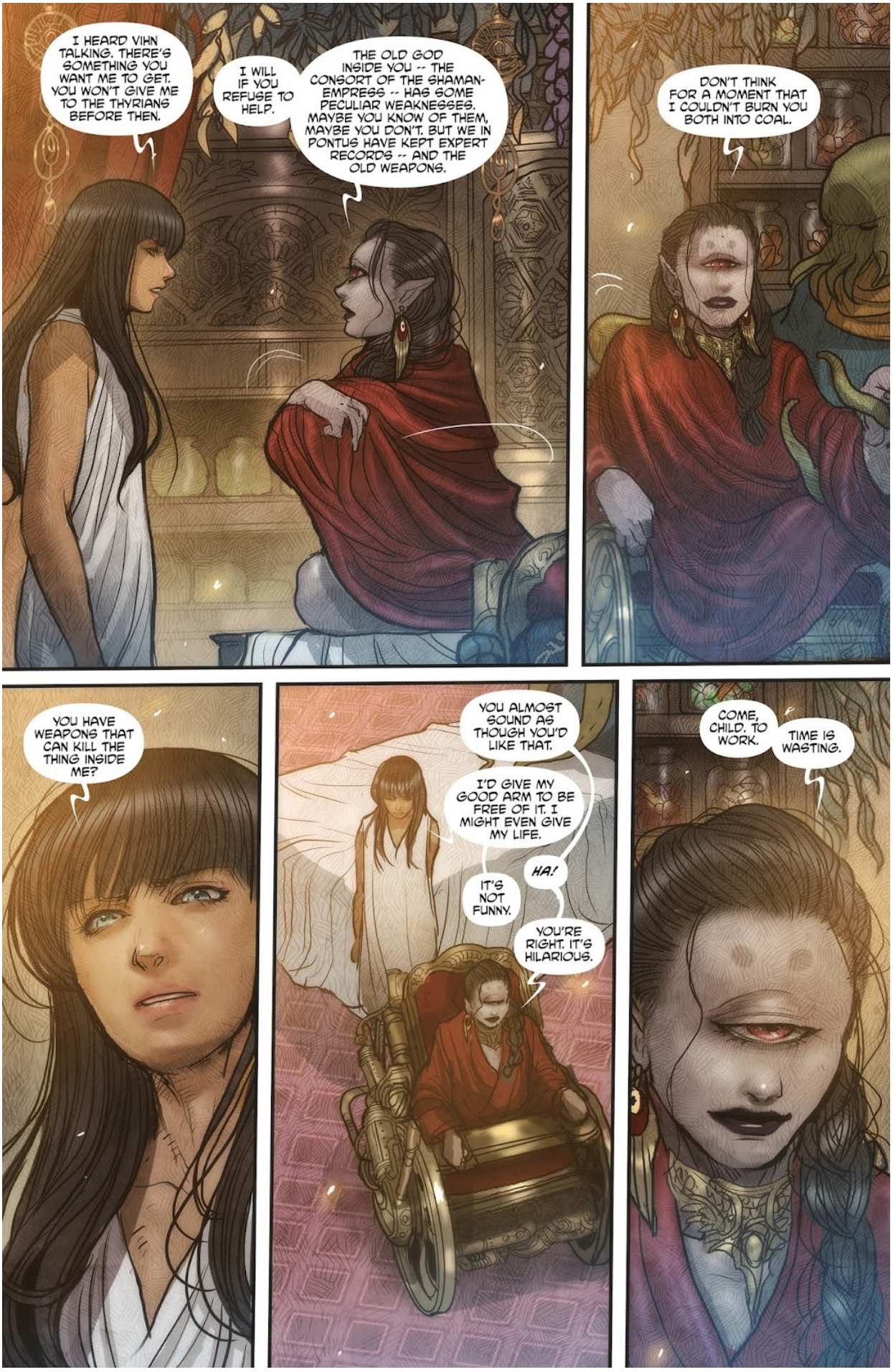
KIPPA An Arcanic fox girl saved from slavery by Maika. Innocent and optimistic, she is frightened by the Monstrum — but trusts Maika and will bravely defend her and others by rushing into battles too dangerous for a child.

TUYA Maika's closest friend in the world, who has been with her since before the Battle of Constantine. Unbeknownst to Maika, she is also the Baroness of the Last Dusk, a high-level member of the Arcanic Dusk Court tasked with containing — or even destroying — Maika's power.

SOMETIMES, I CAN STILL SMELL THEIR BODIES. IN MY HAIR, ON MY SKIN. MY SWEAT STINKS OF THEM.
ASH AND BLOOD, MAIKA. ASH AND BLOOD.
EVEN CONSTANTINE'S NEW IMMIGRANTS COMPLAIN OF THE STENCH. THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS.
THE GOVERNMENT TELLS THEM IT'S JUST ESCAPING GAS.
BUT YOU AND I KNOW THE TRUTH.

TUYA --
I BLAMED MYSELF AT FIRST, YOU KNOW. I SHOULD HAVE KEPT YOU FROM ZAMORA. I SHOULD HAVE BROKEN YOUR DAMNED LEGS.
BUT I ALWAYS KNEW IT WOULDN'T HAVE STOPPED YOU.
YOU'D THINK ACCIDENTALLY MURDERING AN ENTIRE CITY WOULD MAKE SOMEONE CAUTIOUS. YOU'D THINK THE POSSIBLITY OF LOSING YOUR ONLY FRIEND IN THE WORLD WOULD MAKE YOU HESITATE.
BUT THAT'S NOT HOW YOU WERE MADE, IS IT?
YOU WERE CREATED TO BE A WEAPON. AND WEAPONS HAVE NO CAUTION. THEY'RE POINTED IN A DIRECTION AND UNLEASHED.
YOU HAD SO MANY CHANCES TO PROVE TO ME YOU WERE MORE THAN THAT...
...BUT YOU WENT TOO FAR. I CAN'T PROTECT YOU ANYMORE.

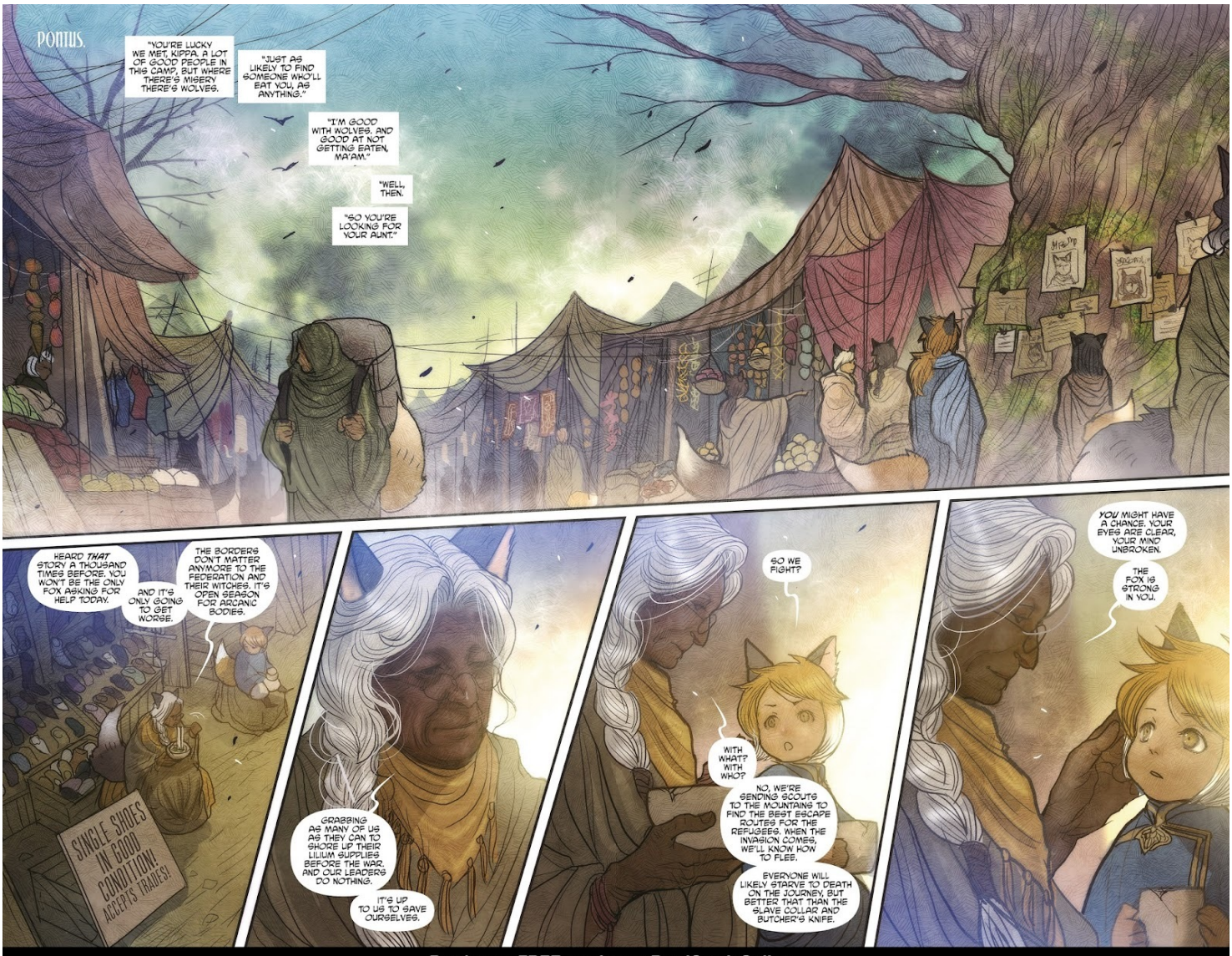

...SHOULD HAVE ANTICIPATED THE CHILD'S BLOOD WOULD OVERWHELM THE SHIELD. THE MACHINERY WAS ALREADY TEETERING ON COLLAPSE.
THE DESTRUCTION IS TOTAL. THERE IS NO REPAIRING THE SHIELD. WE LACK BOTH THE TECHNOLOGY AND THE SKILL.
WHILE I HAVE ONLY THE UTMOST RESPECT FOR YOUR ADVISORS, FIRST COUNSELOR, THEY'RE WRONG ABOUT THE SHIELD. IT CAN BE FIXED.
THE EQUIPMENT EXISTS. AS DOES THE KNOWLEDGE.
WE WILL SIMPLY NEED MAIKA TO FETCH THEM FOR US.
WHATEVER YOU WANT, THE ANSWER IS NO.
VIHN, YOU'RE CERTAIN ABOUT THIS? THE SAFEGUARDS AROUND THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S LABORATORY HAVE NEVER BEEN BREACHED.
WHICH MEANS EVERYTHING WE REQUIRE IS STILL THERE.
THEN MAKE THE ARRANGEMENTS. QUICKLY.
I SAID --
YOU, CHILD, DESTROYED THE PONTUS SHIELD. THE SHIELD THAT HAS PROTECTED THIS CITY AND ITS PEOPLE FOR GENERATIONS.
I'M WILLING TO ACCEPT YOUR ACTIONS WERE NOT DELIBERATE. I'M ALSO WILLING TO BEAR RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALLOWING YOU NEAR THE SHIELD WITHOUT MAKING CERTAIN THAT YOU -- AND WE -- WERE PREPARED.
BUT NOW THE THYRIANS ARE AMASSING. FOR THE SAKE OF OUR OWN SURVIVAL WE MUST ASSUME THEIR SPIES HAVE INFORMED THEM THE SHIELD IS INOPERABLE.
I AM TOLD BY MY OWN SECURITY SERVICES THAT THEY WANT YOU.
BE ASSURED, MAIKA HALFWOLF -- I WILL HAND YOU OVER BEFORE I ALLOW THEIR QUEEN TO SET KEEL INSIDE OUR HARBOR.


I HEARD VIHN TALKING. THERE'S SOMETHING YOU WANT ME TO GET. YOU WON'T GIVE ME TO THE THYRIANS BEFORE THEN.
I WILL IF YOU REFUSE TO HELP.
THE OLD GOD INSIDE YOU -- THE CONSORT OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS -- HAS SOME PECULIAR WEAKNESSES. MAYBE YOU KNOW OF THEM, MAYBE YOU DON'T. BUT WE IN PONTUS HAVE KEPT EXPERT RECORDS -- AND THE OLD WEAPONS.
DON'T THINK FOR A MOMENT THAT I COULDN'T BURN YOU BOTH INTO COAL.
YOU HAVE WEAPONS THAT CAN KILL THE THING INSIDE ME?
YOU ALMOST SOUND AS THOUGH YOU'D LIKE THAT.
I'D GIVE MY GOOD ARM TO BE FREE OF IT. I MIGHT EVEN GIVE MY LIFE.
HA!
IT'S NOT FUNNY.
YOU'RE RIGHT. IT'S HILARIOUS.
COME, CHILD. TO WORK.
TIME IS WASTING.

I AM NOT SOME... PRINCESS... TO BE SOLD OFF TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER.
ABSOLUTELY NOT.
I AM THE WARLORD, THE SWORD OF THE EAST.
THE REASON NONE OF YOU ARE DEAD OR ENSLAVED IS BECAUSE OF ME.
THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE DUSK AND DAWN COURTS REQUIRES MORE THAN A SIGNED PIECE OF PAPER. IT REQUIRES BINDING PROMISES.
AREN'T YOU?
BE STILL, AKU.
WARS ARE ALSO WON THAT WAY, MY DEAR.
AND WHILE IT WOULD MAKE SENSE THAT WE'D PUT ASIDE HISTORIC ENMITIES IN FAVOR OF SURVIVAL, YOU OF ALL PEOPLE KNOW THAT'S NOT HOW IT ALWAYS WORKS.
BUT YOU HAVE THE LATEST WEAPONS TECHNOLOGY, WHILE WE POSSESS A MASSIVE ARMY AND A RICH SUPPLY CHAIN.
TRUST ME. I DON'T WANT TO MARRY YOU, EITHER.

OR DIDN'T YOU BETRAY OVER A THOUSAND DUSK COURT LIVES, INCLUDING THOSE OF DEFENSELESS REFUGEES, DURING THE BATTLE AT FARFANG FJORD?
JUST SO YOUR OWN DAWN COURT TROOPS COULD ESCAPE AN AMBUSH?
YOUR GENERAL --
-- DIED TRYING TO SAVE HER SOLDIERS IN THAT ATTACK.
SO NO. YOUR WORD SIMPLY ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH.
WE NEED BLOOD.
IT'S GOOD YOU ARRIVED WHEN YOU DID, TANNO. THERE'S VENOM IN THE AIR.
HMPH. HAVE WE LEARNED WHY THE OTHER ANCIENTS OF THE DAWN COURT WEREN'T PRESENT FOR THE NEGOTIATION?
THEY'RE NOT IN THE CITY... UP AND VANISHED. OUR INFORMANTS CAN'T TELL US WHEN OR EVEN *IF* THEY LEFT.
WHICH MAKES NO SENSE. WHAT ANCIENT WOULD TRAVEL NOW? AND ALL OF THEM, TOGETHER? THEY'RE TOO CAUTIOUS FOR THAT KIND OF FOOLISHNESS.
THE BARONESS WAS TROUBLED BY THEIR ABSENCE.
AS AM I.

"WHAT ABOUT FISK? HAS SHE LEARNED ANYTHING?"
"SHE FOUND A CAT WILLING TO TALK. SOME APPRENTICE WHO SAYS THE WARLORD COMMITTED A RECENT ATROCITY THAT INVOLVED THE LOCAL NEKOMANCERS."
"*HMPH.* NOTHING FISK FINDS WILL MAKE THE BARONESS CHANGE HER MIND ABOUT CEMENTING THE ALLIANCE.
"NOT IF IT MEANS SHE'LL GAIN CLOSER ACCESS TO THE WOLF QUEEN AND HER DEMON GRANDDAUGHTER."
GODDESS, HAVE MERCY.


PONTUS.
"YOU'RE LUCKY WE MET, KIPPA. A LOT OF GOOD PEOPLE IN THIS CAMP, BUT WHERE THERE'S MISERY THERE'S WOLVES.
"JUST AS LIKELY TO FIND SOMEONE WHO'LL EAT YOU, AS ANYTHING."
"I'M GOOD WITH WOLVES, AND GOOD AT NOT GETTING EATEN, MA'AM."
"WELL, THEN.
"SO YOU'RE LOOKING FOR YOUR AUNT."
HEARD THAT STORY A THOUSAND TIMES BEFORE. YOU WON'T BE THE ONLY FOX ASKING FOR HELP TODAY.
AND IT'S ONLY GOING TO GET WORSE.
THE BORDERS DON'T MATTER ANYMORE TO THE FEDERATION AND THEIR WITCHES. IT'S OPEN SEASON FOR ARCANIC BODIES.
SINGLE SHOES IN GOOD CONDITION! ACCEPTS TRADES!
GRABBING AS MANY OF US AS THEY CAN TO SHORE UP THEIR LILIUM SUPPLIES BEFORE THE WAR, AND OUR LEADERS DO NOTHING.
IT'S UP TO US TO SAVE OURSELVES.
SO WE FIGHT?
WITH WHAT? WITH WHO?
NO, WE'RE SENDING SCOUTS TO THE MOUNTAINS TO FIND THE BEST ESCAPE ROUTES FOR THE REFUGEES. WHEN THE INVASION COMES, WE'LL KNOW HOW TO FLEE.
EVERYONE WILL LIKELY STARVE TO DEATH ON THE JOURNEY, BUT BETTER THAT THAN THE SLAVE COLLAR AND BUTCHER'S KNIFE.
YOU MIGHT HAVE A CHANCE. YOUR EYES ARE CLEAR, YOUR MIND UNBROKEN.
THE FOX IS STRONG IN YOU.

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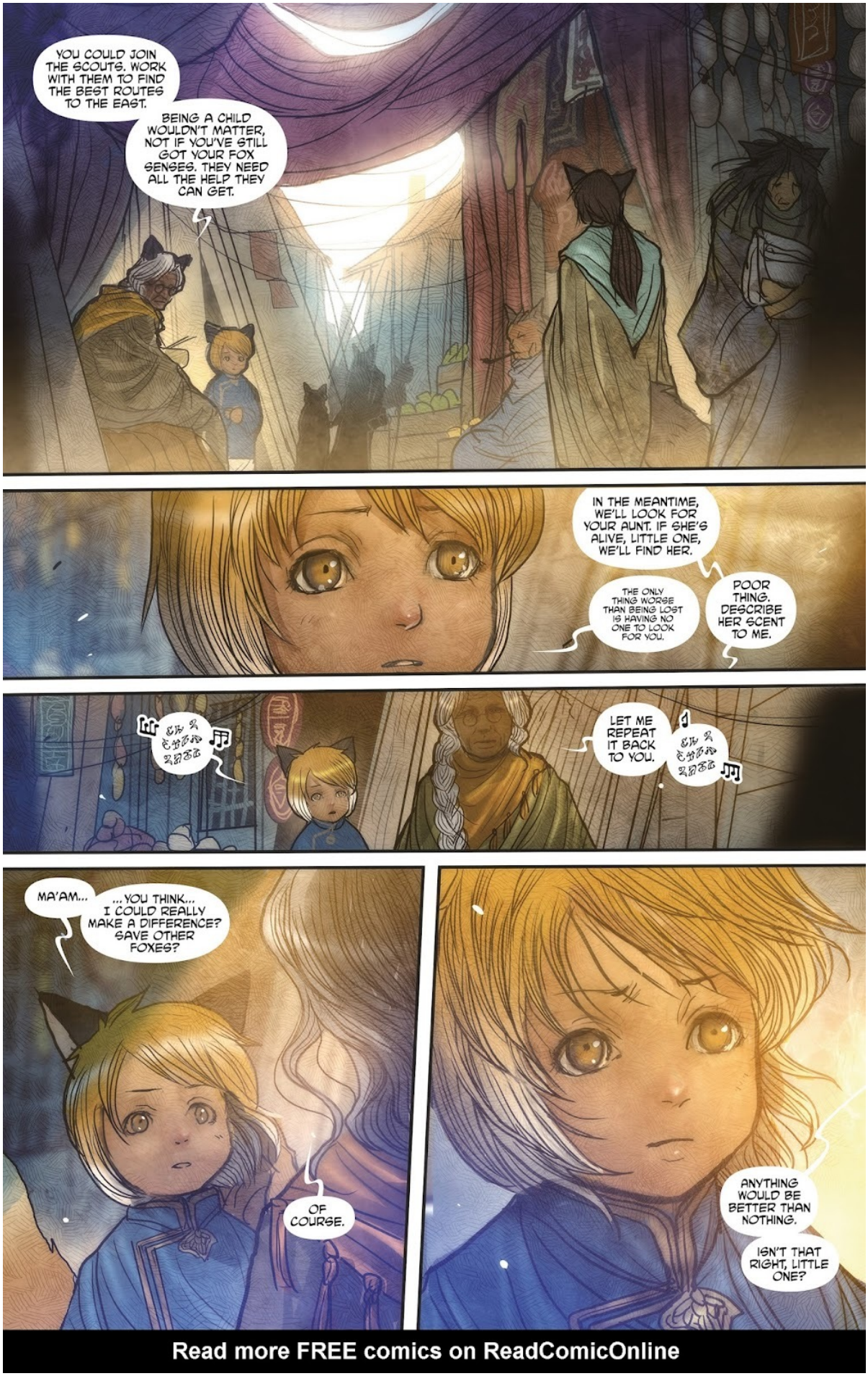
YOU COULD JOIN THE SCOUTS. WORK WITH THEM TO FIND THE BEST ROUTES TO THE EAST.
BEING A CHILD WOULDN'T MATTER, NOT IF YOU'VE STILL GOT YOUR FOX SENSES. THEY NEED ALL THE HELP THEY CAN GET.
IN THE MEANTIME, WE'LL LOOK FOR YOUR AUNT. IF SHE'S ALIVE, LITTLE ONE, WE'LL FIND HER.
THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN BEING LOST IS HAVING NO ONE TO LOOK FOR YOU.
POOR THING. DESCRIBE HER SCENT TO ME.
LET ME REPEAT IT BACK TO YOU.
MA'AM...
...YOU THINK... I COULD REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE? SAVE OTHER FOXES?
OF COURSE.
ANYTHING WOULD BE BETTER THAN NOTHING.
ISN'T THAT RIGHT, LITTLE ONE?

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HALFWOLF.
THERE'S MUSIC IN THIS THING, CAT. I NEVER COULD HEAR IT BEFORE, BUT SOMETHING'S CHANGED. IF I COULD JUST GET CLOSER...
THAT MUSIC IS A LIE. YOU MUST NOT LISTEN.
WHAT DO YOU WANT?
THERE'S... NEWS FROM THYRIA.
I KNOW ABOUT THE FLEET OUTSIDE THE BORDER. THE QUEENS WANT MY HEAD.
ONE OF THE BLOOD QUEENS WAS MURDERED. THE OTHER, CRITICALLY WOUNDED.
ALAS, THIS WILL ONLY MAKE THINGS MORE DIFFICULT FOR YOU.

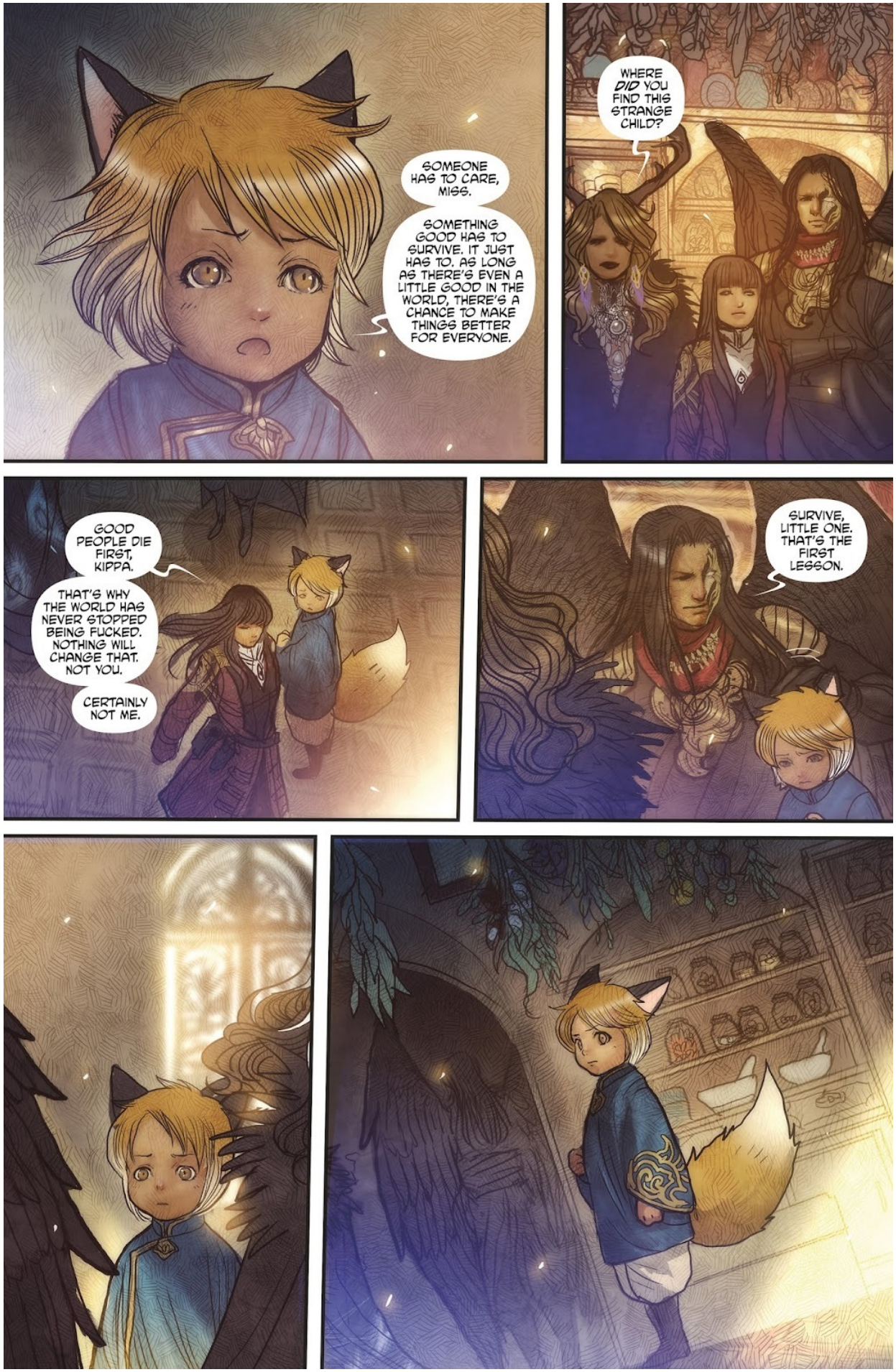
SEIZI.
KENZI.
I'M SORRY.
IF YOU'RE HERE... IT MEANS YOU LOST EVERYTHING. BECAUSE OF ME.
IF WE'RE HERE, IT'S BECAUSE FAMILY PROTECTS FAMILY.
FAMILY ENDURES.
TELL US ABOUT THE BLOOD QUEENS.
INQUISITRIXES INFILTRATED THE CITADEL. MY INFORMANTS REPORT THEY STOLE AN ARTIFACT.
THE PUBLIC DOESN'T KNOW YET, OR ELSE IT WOULD CAUSE A TERROR.
FUCK.
THE OTHER FRAGMENT OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S MASK. THAT HAS TO BE WHAT THE INQUISITRIXES TOOK.

LET THEM HAVE THE CURSED THING.
I'M FAR MORE TROUBLED THAT THE THRYIANS ARE PREPARING TO ATTACK. NOW, MORE THAN EVER, WE REQUIRE SOLIDARITY.
BUT INSTEAD WE'LL WASTE OUR FORCES ON EACH OTHER, WHILE THE FEDERATION PREPARES FOR WAR.
WAIT... YOU WERE ALREADY AWARE THAT THE BLOOD QUEENS HAD A FRAGMENT OF THE --
AH, MAIKA. I'M GLAD I FOUND YOU.
COMMANDERS IMURA. A PLEASURE TO SEE YOU BOTH AGAIN.
THE FIRST COUNSELOR IS WAITING FOR YOU IN HER OFFICE.
A WORD OF CAUTION, MAIKA.
THE LESS YOU SPEAK OF THE MASK, THE BETTER. THE LESS YOU THINK OF IT, THE LESS YOU TOUCH IT... THESE ARE PRECAUTIONS THAT YOU, ABOVE ALL OTHERS, SHOULD TAKE.
I'M SURE ZINN HAS GIVEN YOU SIMILAR UNHEEDED WARNINGS.
WHAT MAKES YOU THINK --
THAT YOU'RE NOT CARRYING A FRAGMENT IN THE POUCH AT YOUR WAIST? IF ONLY THE LIES OF THE YOUNG WERE ALWAYS SO CHARMING.
YOURS IS THE WORST KEPT SECRET IN THE KNOWN WORLD. YOUR CARELESSNESS VERGES ON A DEATH WISH.
IF THE INQUISITRIXES KNEW WHERE TO FIND ONE FRAGMENT, THEN THEY'LL SURELY BE COMING HERE FOR YOURS, MAIKA.
I, FOR ONE, WELCOME THE EXCITEMENT.
BUT *AFTER* THE SHIELD IS FIXED.

MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE, REN. I'M JUST FINISHING UP SOME... MAIL... THAT I'D BEEN PUTTING OFF.

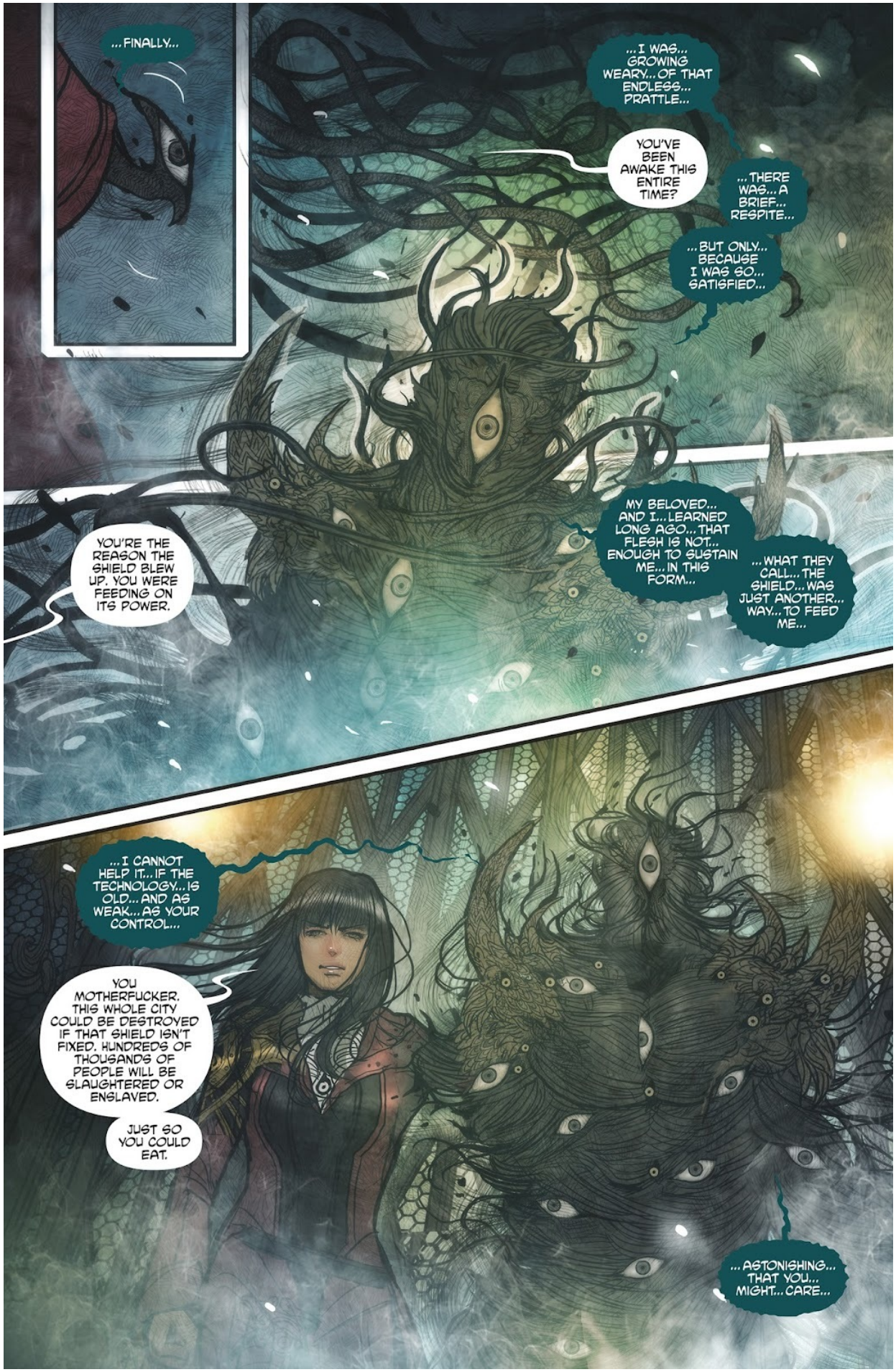
I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME. THE INQUISITRIXES --
-- NOW POSSESS A FRAGMENT OF THE MASK. YES, OF COURSE WE KNOW.
IT WON'T BE A PROBLEM. IN FACT, WE'VE LEARNED A GREAT DEAL IN THE DAYS SINCE THEY STOLE IT.
FINALLY, WE HAVE CONFIRMATION THAT THE CUMAEA HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED BEYOND EVEN THE MOTHER SUPERIOR.
WHAT WILL BE DONE?
NOTHING THAT'S YOUR CONCERN. THIS IS YOUR LUCKY DAY. CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES MEANS YOUR ASSIGNMENT WITH THE HALFWOLF IS ALMOST COMPLETE.
EXCEPT FOR ONE LAST THING.
WE NEED YOU TO BRING US THE CHILD.
BUT, MAIKA --
NO. THE OTHER CHILD.
KIPPA?
WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH HER?
THAT'S THE DOCTOR'S CONCERN, AS ALWAYS.
I KNOW IT HASN'T BEEN EASY, REN.
NEGOTIATING ALL YOUR IDENTITIES, SERVING MULTIPLE MASTERS, HAS BEEN A WRETCHED BURDEN.
BUT YOU'VE ALMOST PAID YOUR DEBT. JUST THIS ONE LAST THING AND YOU'LL BE FREE.
OR YOU CAN RESIST... AND THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES.
SO BRING US THE CHILD, REN.
TONIGHT.

SO... FOR THE LAST *THREE THOUSAND* YEARS THE LEADERS OF PONTUS HAVE KNOWN THE LOCATION OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S SOUTHERN LABORATORY...
... AND THEY DID *NOTHING.*
THERE WAS NOTHING TO *BE* DONE.
THE DOORS CANNOT BE BREACHED WITH BOMBS. THE FLOORS CANNOT BE BROKEN INTO VIA TUNNEL.
NO ONE CAN ENTER THE LABORATORY.
NOT ANCIENTS, NOT HER BLOOD DESCENDANTS -- NOT EVEN THOSE RARE ONES WHO BEAR THE MARK OF THE EYE.
TRUST ME, A FEW HAVE TRIED OVER THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS. SOME KEY ELEMENT WAS ALWAYS MISSING.
BUT YOU THINK I CAN GET IN.
IF NOT YOU, THEN NO ONE.
AND YOU'RE NOT COMING WITH ME. WHY? MAYBE I'LL MISREAD THIS LIST? MAKE A MISTAKE.
THERE MAY BE TRAPS FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE NOT OF THE BLOOD.
AND IF I LOVE ANYTHING, IT'S STAYING ALIVE.
TRAPS, *HUH?* WHAT ELSE?
IF THE SCHOLARS ARE CORRECT, THE MOST IMPORTANT ARCHIVE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE KNOWN WORLD. LOST INVENTIONS OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS, THE TOOLS SHE USED TO CREATE TECHNOLOGIES THAT STILL FUNCTION, THOUSANDS OF YEARS LATER.
SO, WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THERE'S A LOT OF JUNK I'LL NEED TO SORT THROUGH.
MAYBE I SHOULD JUST LET MYSELF BE HANDED OVER TO THE THYRIANS. PONTUS CAN LIVE OR DIE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.
YOU AND YOUR EMPTY THREATS. DO YOU NEVER TIRE OF YOUR BRAVADO?
TRY BEING HONEST FOR ONCE AND SAY YOU'RE FRIGHTENED. IT WOULD BE EASIER.
MISS?
PLEASE DON'T JOKE ABOUT SUCH THINGS. I'VE JUST COME BACK FROM ANOTHER REFUGEE CAMP. EVERYONE *ALREADY* THINKS PONTUS IS GOING TO FALL.
THEY'RE GOOD PEOPLE, BUT NONE OF THEM BELIEVE THEY'RE SAFE HERE BECAUSE THEY DON'T THINK ANYONE CARES.


SOMEONE HAS TO CARE, MISS.
SOMETHING GOOD HAS TO SURVIVE. IT JUST HAS TO. AS LONG AS THERE'S EVEN A LITTLE GOOD IN THE WORLD, THERE'S A CHANCE TO MAKE THINGS BETTER FOR EVERYONE.
WHERE *DID* YOU FIND THIS STRANGE CHILD?
GOOD PEOPLE DIE FIRST, KIPPA.
THAT'S WHY THE WORLD HAS NEVER STOPPED BEING FUCKED. NOTHING WILL CHANGE THAT. NOT YOU.
CERTAINLY NOT ME.
SURVIVE, LITTLE ONE. THAT'S THE FIRST LESSON.

KIPPA!
MASTER REN! I'M SO GLAD TO SEE YOU.
I'VE BEEN LOOKING EVERYWHERE FOR YOU, KIPPA. WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
INTO THE MOUNTAINS TO HELP THE FOX SCOUTS FIND SAFE PASSAGE FOR THE REFUGEES. JUST IN CASE THE WAR COMES HERE.
TELL... TELL MISS THAT I HOPE TO SEE HER AGAIN.
I DOUBT SHE'LL NOTICE I'M GONE, BUT... JUST IN CASE. I DON'T WANT HER TO BE WORRIED.
AND YOU. I'LL PRAY TO THE GODDESS EVERY DAY FOR YOU.
YOU'RE THE BEST FRIEND I'VE HAD SINCE MY FAMILY DIED, MASTER REN.
I LOVE YOU.
KIPPA.
WHY DON'T I COME WITH YOU? JUST FOR A LITTLE BIT. TO MAKE CERTAIN YOU'RE SAFE WITH THESE SCOUTS.

...THE LAB IS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ELEVATOR. WE PULLED THE GUARDS THAT ARE USUALLY STATIONED THERE.
WE DON'T WANT ANYONE KNOWING WHAT YOU'RE ATTEMPTING, ESPECIALLY SHOULD YOU SUCCEED.
RIGHT.
ARE YOU LISTENING?
NO.
CORVIN.
YOU'RE GOING TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME. OR GODDESS HELP YOU, I WILL RIP YOU APART WITH MY BARE HANDS.
SHOULD THERE BE AN ATTACK FROM THE THYRIANS... OR THE FEDERATION...
I'LL KEEP THE FOX CHILD SAFE.
THIS *IS* WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO ASK, WASN'T IT?
FUCK YOU.


...FINALLY...
...I WAS... GROWING WEARY... OF THAT ENDLESS... PRATTLE...
YOU'VE BEEN AWAKE THIS ENTIRE TIME?
...THERE WAS... A BRIEF... RESPITE...
...BUT ONLY... BECAUSE I WAS SO... SATISFIED...
YOU'RE THE REASON THE SHIELD BLEW UP. YOU WERE FEEDING ON ITS POWER.
MY BELOVED... AND I... LEARNED LONG AGO... THAT FLESH IS NOT... ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN ME... IN THIS FORM...
...WHAT THEY CALL... THE SHIELD... WAS JUST ANOTHER... WAY... TO FEED ME...
...I CANNOT HELP IT... IF THE TECHNOLOGY... IS OLD... AND AS WEAK... AS YOUR CONTROL...
YOU MOTHERFUCKER. THIS WHOLE CITY COULD BE DESTROYED IF THAT SHIELD ISN'T FIXED. HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WILL BE SLAUGHTERED OR ENSLAVED.
JUST SO YOU COULD EAT.
...ASTONISHING... THAT YOU... MIGHT... CARE...

OH, SHUT UP.
CAN YOU GET US INTO THE LAB?
...DO NOT... JEST...
I WASN'T. APPARENTLY NO ONE ELSE HAS BROKEN INTO THIS PLACE.
BECAUSE... THEY WERE NOT... A GOD...
...THE DOOR... WAS KEYED... TO ME... BEFORE THE BELOVED'S... PASSING...
...ONLY I... KNOW THE COMBINATION...
...THE BELOVED... FEARED... WHAT OTHERS... WOULD DO... WITH HER GENIUS...

...IT WILL... BE GOOD... TO BE HOME... AGAIN...
YOU CAN'T OPEN IT.
...BE... STILL...
YOU'VE FORGOTTEN THE COMBINATION.
...IT HAS BEEN... THREE THOUSAND YEARS...
THAT'S RIGHT. MAYBE I SHOULD PUT YOU IN A HOME FOR SENILE FUCKING GODS.

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TO BE CONTINUED...

An excerpt of a lecture from the esteemed **Professor Tam Tam,** former First Record-Keeper of the Is'hami Temple, and learned contemporary of Namron Black Claw...

Ah, the Old Gods.

We've discussed them before – their immense power, their destructive natures – how they are the very opposite of divine. Invaders, some Poets claim. Demonic entities from another world, whose unending hunger was an abomination.

Thank Ubasti they were banished. And yet...and yet...how quickly the truth was forgotten.

According to our records, the first cult of the Old Gods emerged almost four thousand years ago, well inland from the coast where humans already worshipped the Wave Empress and her Siren children.

Humans were the logical fools to fall prey to the Old Gods – having never battled them, as the Ancients had – and afflicted by a poverty of spirit unmatched by even the most crude animal. How easily fooled they were by such otherwordly magnificence, whispering empty prayers, making blood sacrifices to demons that would consume them in a heartbeat if they were able.

And yet, in the end, Arcanics fared little better.

The fault rests with one of the Ancients, a changeling trickster who disguised herself to live among mortal humans and Arcanics. She was, perhaps, a little too fond of telling stories, and not wary enough of her own charisma.

Her most famous (and improbable) tale was about an Old God who escapes to the known world in search of redemption, and falls in love with a powerful queen. Against all good sense, this frivolity spread like wildfire – and rewrote history. Suddenly, the Old Gods were creatures of tragedy and romance, longing to walk amongst mortals, and share their wisdom.

And that was enough, kits, to become a religion. Benign, yes, based on a philosophy of love and compassion, and mercy. Looking to the Old Gods as guides to an enlightened life.

But cats have never been fooled. We have never forgotten the horror.

The horror that Ubasti promises will come again.

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NEXT ISSUE

#monstress

MONSTRESS™ ISSUE 15

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